

TAKEOVER

The strange affair of the James Bond novel Ian Fleming 'wrote' six years after his death—and, incidentally, of an unlikely assortment of other writers planning their posthumous 'works'

By Peter Fleming



ONE DAY IN OCTOBER, 1970 I received a short typewritten letter from an address in Hertfordshire. "I have," wrote Mr A, "some very unusual and I believe pleasurable news concerning your late brother Ian which I should like to discuss with you." He felt that "it is of the utmost importance that you are consulted, as the personal feelings of you and your family must, I consider, be respected." He had no wish to be "vague or mysterious," but when he had explained the situation I would understand his reasons for not taking the matter any further in a letter.

Ian had been dead for six years. It was not easy to imagine what "news" about him Mr A might have, and the bit about the need to respect my personal feelings was faintly ominous. I sent him a rather frigid postcard, asking him to ring me up. On the telephone Mr A, who sounded a nice man, declined to reveal anything more of the matter in hand, but a meeting was arranged for the following Sunday morning.

He arrived punctually. There was a woman in the car with him, but he left her there and came in alone. Mr A turned out to be a retired bank officer aged 73—gentle, sincere, with a rather scuffed appearance but a cheerful manner. He handed me a neat but bulky typescript on the cover of which was written *Take Over: a James Bond thriller* and gave me his account of its provenance: Mr A's wife died three years

ago. One day in December, 1969, his daughter, Vera, was recovering from an illness. She had a writing-pad in front of her; her eye caught a framed photograph of her mother, she thought "I wish you could write me a letter, Mum," and immediately the pen in her hand started to write, with difficulty, "I love you Vera."

Thus began a correspondence from which Mr A and Vera derived much comfort. Mrs A gave glowing though rather imprecise accounts of life in the next world and often displayed knowledge of small terrestrial events (such as which television programmes Mr A had been watching the night before) of which Vera, living twelve miles away from her father, could have had no cognisance. The process of automatic writing, hesitant at first, grew steadily more fluent; the handwriting, ceasing to be a scrawl, became Mrs A's, which among other notable differences slopes in the opposite direction from her daughter's.

In May, 1970 Mrs A, in a long message which has some of the hallmarks of a "prepared statement," revealed that among her fellow-spirits were a number of authors, all of them eager to continue their careers by dictating to Vera, through her late mother, the texts of novels or (as later appeared) short stories which they had put together after passing on.

Between May 5 and 11 six authors transmitted to Vera, always in her mother's handwriting, what may not unfairly be called manifestos, each running to about 500 words. The authors were Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, H G Wells,

Edgar Wallace, Ruby M Ayres, Ian Fleming and Somerset Maugham. (Miss Ayres later dropped out of the syndicate, on promotion to a "Higher Plane." Her place was taken by Bernard Shaw, who once chided Mr A for mispronouncing Androcules; it should, he insisted, be "Androcules"). All shared a common purpose, thus summarised by Somerset Maugham: "I am hoping that, given time, I shall be one of the fortunate spirits who will be allowed to write through this (Vera's) hand something which cannot conceivably be disputed as being my own work and if this can be achieved then people on earth will surely believe we live on after 'death' and that life goes on and very pleasantly I can assure you."

The five other authors took the same line; they hoped that, if they could go on writing and (presumably) this crucial problem was never mentioned, getting published, people would come to believe in the amenities of what used to be called the Hereafter, and would lose their fear of death.

Textually, there are two points worth noting about these manifestos (perhaps "trailers" would be a more descriptive word). The first is that they include words which, as her husband and daughter agree, would have been outside the scope of Mrs A's vocabulary: "evaluate," "compulsive," "impervious" and "imminent" are examples. The second is a certain homogeneity between the styles of the six authors. It is true that Ruby M Ayres mentions, as a spirit of her sex might be expected to, the fact that "physical love is not practised here," and that Edgar Wallace, unlike any of the others, reveals something of his domestic circumstances ("I have a beautiful house and grounds and all my books are around me and many more that have never been read by mortals"). But on the whole the impression produced is, not of six disparate and talented personalities expressing themselves, but of one second-rate mind speaking—allegedly—for them.

Ian Fleming's contribution is particularly untrue to life. Not only does he, like Maugham, use the adjective "pleasurable"—a word which I feel sure neither of them employed except in a context of mild parody—but it is inconceivable that he would ever have used the words "another thrilling and gripping story about this romantic rogue 007" to describe his project for a posthumous addition to the James Bond saga.

I NOW GOING BACK TO MY first interview with Mr A and his daughter, who had joined us from the car—held in my hands the 60,000-word end-product of that project; for in the foreword to *Take Over* Ian revealed that he had been chosen to be the first author to use the highly efficient transmission-channel represented by Vera and her late mother. These were, he admitted, "very unusual circumstances" in which to write a book; but he added—again with an uncharacteristic choice of verbiage—that although "some of you will scoff and say, Balderdash, others will believe me."

While Mr A was explaining the origins of *Take Over* I had been glancing through the typescript. When opportunity offered I said mildly that it did not sound very like Ian; he would not for instance have described a room in a private house, however villainous its occupant, as a "lounge." Vera, who was sitting with a pad on her knee, almost immediately wrote, in her mother's handwriting: "Mr Fleming says Peter is perfectly correct in saying I do not use the word lounge."

Impressed by the prompt establishment of what seemed to be some sort of rapport, I asked if Ian had a message for me. "Mr Fleming says he is very pleased to be

here with his brother and sends greetings."

I had not, before Mr A arrived twenty minutes earlier, been prepared for a dialogue with the Spirit World, but my first impulse was to check the bona fides of my extraterrestrial correspondent, about which, as I thumbed through more and more pages of *Take Over*, I became increasingly sceptical. I asked five more questions:

What was his second Christian name? "Lancaster."

What was his son's second Christian name? "Robert." (Both these answers were correct; both could have been answered correctly by a close reader of *The Life of Ian Fleming* by John Pearson, which was published in London and New York in 1966.)

What were his house-colours at Eton? "Blue and yellow. No. Blue and red. No. I can't do it." (The right answer was cerise and grey.)

Does he remember the name of the boy who broke his nose? "Yes." (Pause.) "Bertram." (It was Henry Douglas-Home, a brother of Sir Alec.)

Does he remember the Russian for Yes (Da)? Pause. Two squiggles. "scap. Please forgive me I cannot get this over."

By this time I had read what was claimed to be one of the most exciting chapters in *Take Over*, and I told Mr A that with the best will in the world I could not recognise my brother's style. Vera at once wrote: "He realises the book is not his style but hopes to be able eventually to get this over correctly although it may take time."

After further discussion of the background to this strange affair my visitors departed, leaving with me what must be one of the oddest typescripts ever produced.

TAKE OVER DEPLOYS IN A reasonably competent manner most of the stock Bond characters and stage-properties—M, Universal Exports, Miss Moneybags and the rest of the 007 set-up; it has the sort of preposterous, cosmic storyline (involving a poisonous gas which will enable its users to dominate the world) which might have occurred to Ian. It is, however, although action-packed, implausible and silly; the style is a tasteless pastiche of the original; and sex nowhere rears its ugly head.

This omission is explained by a passage in what might be called the "service traffic." Vera, while taking (so to speak) dictation of the narrative, always kept a separate pad for corrections, amendments or personal messages from her mother which sometimes interrupted the main transmission. Typical "service traffic" items are "Mr Fleming says we must also alter that part where Bond hears water lapping as that is not right as he is too high up to hear it from his room," and "Yes, this part has to be altered owing to the change in plan of the balloons. Write as follows:—"

The message dealing with sex reads: "We can't put much of that nature in this book as it would be frowned on by spiritualists and our Higher Spirits. I'm glad you understand. He says he used to put this type of thing in some of his books to attract readers who liked that sort of thing."

Whatever its literary shortcomings, *Take Over* represents, in quantitative terms, a formidable achievement. Vera had a full-time job, a house to run and an ailing husband (since dead) from whom for a long time she kept secret her contacts with the Spirit World. In these circumstances to take down—in five months and in somebody

else's handwriting—the text of a 60,000-word thriller was an extraordinary feat; she admits that she found it a heavy strain and Mrs A seems, from the "service traffic," to have been aware of this ("You had better do your potatoes and shopping now dear and perhaps we can continue later on"). Nor did the completion of *Take Over* mark the end of her stint.

WHEN THEY GOT HOME AFTER our first meeting Mr A and his daughter, understandably disappointed by my scepticism, attempted to get in direct touch with Ian Fleming, by-passing Mrs A. The results were unsatisfactory, but when Ian was asked to transmit his signature his autograph appeared on Vera's pad and was then—without a request for an encore—reproduced in triplicate. All these signatures are bold and faithful near-replicas of one which appears on page 324 of Pearson's biography. A fifth was later reproduced in my presence and without apparent effort, when I asked for it. (Five other authors obliged with their autographs, but none bore much resemblance to the originals.)

Shortly after this, on November 3, 1970, the authors began to transmit Tales of Mystery and Imagination. In the following two months Edgar Wallace wrote five, H G Wells and Ian Fleming two each, Conan Doyle and Somerset Maugham one each: a total of some 30,000 words. All are crude essays in Grand Guignol, scarcely differentiated in style and devoid of literary merit.

At the end of January 1971 Mrs A began transmitting to Vera the second full-length work produced by the Spirit World: a novel, as yet untitled, by Somerset Maugham. To give some idea of the extent to which Maugham's style has altered, and his literary craftsmanship deteriorated, since his death in 1965 it is necessary only to quote the opening sentence: "Hope and fear continuously cantered in and out of my uncertain mind as I gazed from the open latticed window upon the scurrying, fluttering, eddying autumn leaves caught and twined hither and thither by the wind."

After she had taken down a few thousand words of this tosh—I am afraid there is no other word for it—Vera's life was overtaken by tragedy; her husband died suddenly. Since then her automatic writings have been largely devoted to correspondence with him—a source of great solace to her.

WHAT IS ONE TO MAKE OF THIS strange business?

Before trying to answer this question, I must make it clear that I rule out any question of chicanery by Mr A, whom I have seen three times, or his daughter, who was present on two of these occasions. They are both persons of complete integrity, deeply interested in the network of communications of which they have become the focus but motivated only by the desire to prove—or to help their correspondents prove—that life continues after death, and in a very agreeable manner. Neither has any literary leanings (nor had the late Mrs A) or is qualified by intellect or education to produce even the inferior fiction for which they have acted as a channel of transmission. If I had to choose a single epithet to describe their attitude to the whole affair I think it would be "guileless."

Having made that plain, with what facts are we left? The most striking fact, surely, is that in eight months—between May 1970 and February 1971—some form of intelligence caused Vera to write down, in her mother's handwriting, over 100,000 words of fiction and a great deal of subsidiary matter and to reproduce with remarkable verisimilitude the signature of one of the authors involved. However

you look at it, a lot of energy was at work here.

The motives of the "spirits" are straightforward and laudable; they seek to convince us that the Next World is a blissful, care-free place. Their methods are more questionable, involving as they do what amounts—in earthly terms, at any rate—to imposture and forgery. I find it impossible to believe that my late brother had any part in the compilation of *Take Over* (the opening chapters of which, incidentally, are set in a part of Europe which he never visited); and I feel certain that "his" attempts to answer my questions—at one session he got the names and sexes of my children wrong—originated from a source about which the only firm deduction possible is that apart from reading the Bond novels, it had made a close study of *The Life of Ian Fleming*, which was published two years after Ian's death.

The author of *Take Over* knew, more or less, what he was about; he had read enough of Ian's books to produce an instantly recognisable pastiche of a James Bond novel, and in the "service traffic" he often intervened to suppress earthly doubts, spoken or unspoken, about its authenticity—e.g., "Yes, dear, Mr Fleming is very pleased with the way the book is progressing and as he is writing it it must be his style, mustn't it?" and "I have been watching you reading bits out of one of Mr Fleming's books and know you are wondering whether our book is going to sound similar as regards the way of putting it. Mr Fleming says... he is confident it will be accepted by his publishers. Try not to worry dear." *Take Over* was submitted to Jona-

than Cape in November 1970 and, wisely, rejected.

Take Over, nevertheless, represents a semi-professional attempt at literary impersonation, carried out with great drive and fluency: 60,000 words transmitted in the spare moments of a busy woman during less than five months. The *soi-disant* Somerset Maugham, by contrast, makes no sense at all. In May 1970 he announced his purpose to produce "something which cannot conceivably be disputed as being my own work"; in January 1971 he was—to take a typical passage—writing: "Shy little snowdrops, their green tipped heads bowed in deference heralding the coming of spring. Fresh green shoots appearing like magic on bushes and trees. Bulbs sprouting from the earth, soon transforming the bleakness into glowing colour and so on and on. Spirit A had at least done his home-work on Ian Fleming; Spirit B seems to be wholly unacquainted with the work of the author whose posthumous novel he (or more probably she) is masterminding.

WELL, THERE IT IS: THAT IS the story so far. Those who, unlike me, have studied the phenomenon of automatic writing may be able to place rational explanations upon the sequence of events which I have described. All I can say about these events is that I found them curious: that their effects upon the earthly protagonists—Vera and her father—appeared to be stimulating and beneficial; and that I thought them worth recording.

—Peter Fleming 1971

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IN MY FASHION

PANTING AFTER FASHION by Ernestine Carter



RICHARD NOTT, who opened his shop in Sloane Avenue four years ago, has just opened a new one in South Street. Christopher, not, good-looking and twenty-five, was a Royal College of Art student in 1962/65, same vintage as Ossie Clark, who the RCA had been at. Christopher studied graphics. In his last year, however, his interest in fashion took over. There was, he says, at that time a departure of fashion at Stafford and he was the first student there to take a diploma in fashion. When he left the RCA, he went for a year to Queen's College, where he was a fashion editor. Then

he decided to start his own business. What made his collection exciting was its courage. It takes courage to make a positive statement. Instead of doing what he piously hoped his clients would like, Christopher McDonnell did what he thought was right. This integrity was what made me admire Yves Saint Laurent, with whom Christopher McDonnell shares a wave-length. I may not agree with what they do, but I admire them for doing it. It takes courage to introduce a young co-designer. Who had heard of Yves Saint Laurent until he was a year old? For that matter, few had heard of Dior

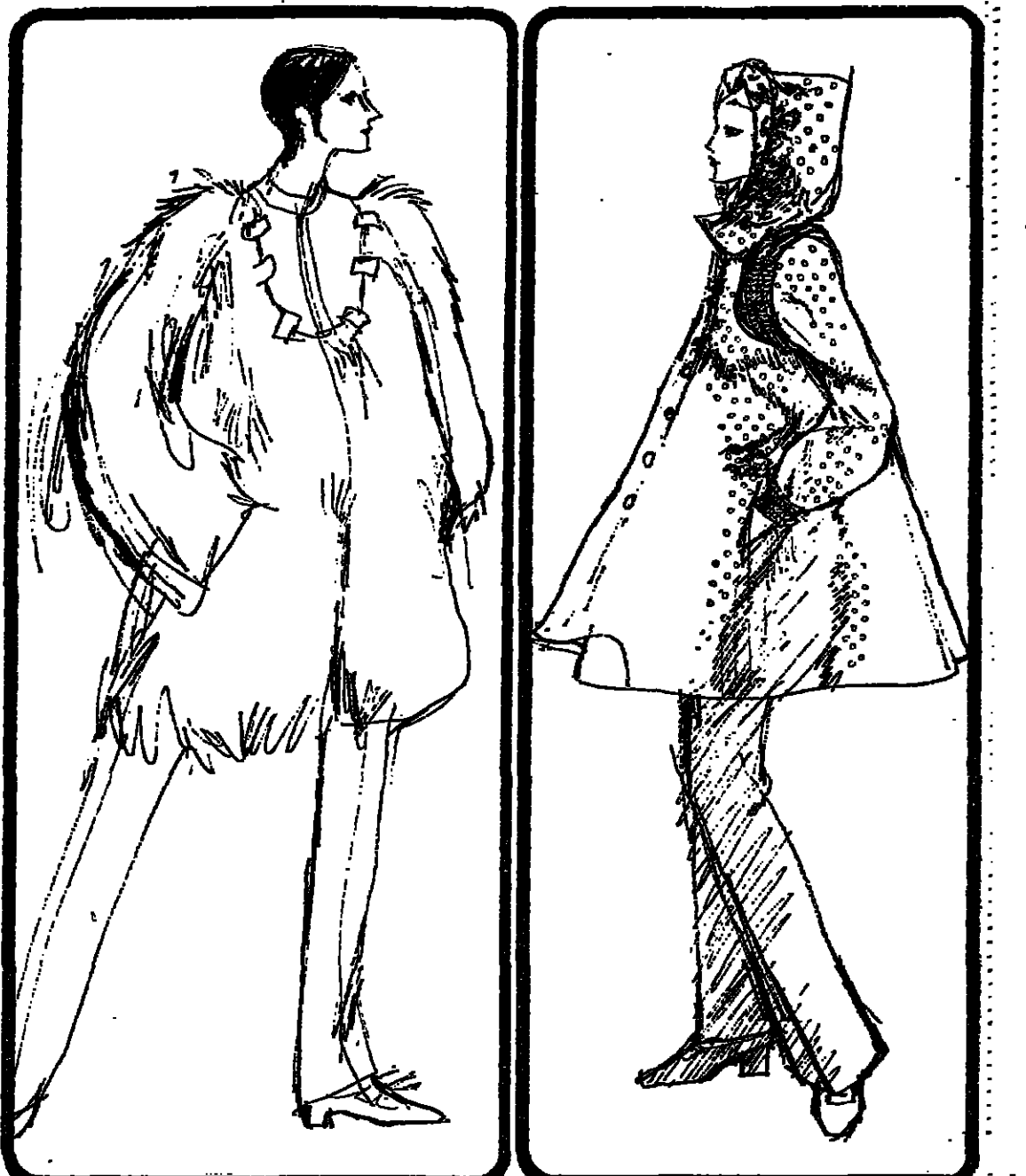
until he left Lelong. Christopher McDonnell gave twenty-three-year-old Richard Nott a prime spot at a peak show time. It takes courage, too, to produce a collection based on a single colour: Christopher's a deep pewter grey. Richard's a chocolate brown. Although both, like nearly everybody else, judge the skirt length issue by emphasising pants (they're wide Oxford bags with turn-ups) when skirts are shown, they are firmly maxi. Only John Bates has made such a determined stand. Fashion has become nervous. Designers have become tentative and unsure. Courage is what separates the men from the boys, the designers from the dress makers.

LEFT, by Richard Nott for Marrian-McDonnell: chocolate tunic, leather belted, the wide three-quarter sleeves showing the sleeves of the cream silk shirt; matching cream crepe trousers. CENTRE, by Christopher McDonnell for Marrian-McDonnell: mass jacket and trousers in pebble gaberdine, shirt in grey voile printed in white, worn with a pewter

gaberdine mid raincoat, deeply pleated. RIGHT, pebble wool crepe, the jacket long and belted, the narrow knee-length skirt maxi overskirt. The georgette shirt is printed in orange Staffordshire knots (Christopher McDonnell's school insignia) especially for him by Simon. Hats by Maynard. Available the beginning of October at Marrian-McDonnell. Prices are from £30 to £50.

ANYONE who likes the kind of heat that only mad dogs and Englishmen (and journalists) go out in can be sure that the last two weeks in July will be sweltering. These are the weeks that the couture houses in London, Rome and Paris show their autumn/winter collections. Last week, not a scorcher, but quite hot enough, two members of the dwindling Incorporated

Society of London Fashion Designers, Hardy Amies and Clive showed to the Press. The ISLFD will dwindle even further, for Clive is closing his House at the end of the month. This makes Christopher McDonnell's talented collection, also shown last week, the more important. The ready-to-wear, not the couture, is where the action is today.



CLIVE did a ripple through of prototypes: an assemblage of coats for men and women, long and short, in Borg, the most interesting in a shaggy pile they call "goat"; a group of jersey and Ban-lon dresses inset with abstract patterns in Jordan almond colours. It is not, he says, a collection but a kind of sampling, for although he is closing his couture business, he will continue as design consultant. Above, palest grey Borg "goat" yoked in matching Duskin (Schlaepfer's suede fabric); Duskin trousers.

HARDY AMIES, as designed by Ken Fleetwood, shows more skirts than trousers, the lengths variable. Suits have long jackets, usually belted, and there is lots of fur trim. Long tweed skirts are topped with satin blouses in racing colours. Most interesting are the coats, flaring from narrow tops, their tight armholes outlined in contrasting fabric. Rayne's wedge shoes (will there be a heel left?) glitter with rhinestones. Above, coat in white spotted brown vinyl, lined in fake calf, the armholes outlined in brown jersey; printed calf shirt, brown jersey trousers.

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KEEPING UP

With pants. Unless Paris comes up with a new idea (and about time too), it looks as if skirts will be as rare as hells. Far right is a preview from Irene Galitzine's collection which she will show in Rome tomorrow night: a typically couture trouser suit. Near right is how the young see pants. The smartest thing is to own a second-hand pair of real American workman's dungarees, the baggier the better, the shabbier the chic-er. Next best is to buy a pair and shabby them yourself. Eric Boman sketched the Annacat version, designed by Lesley Poole, metal clipped, with side and backside pockets, plus a loop for a hammer. £10.95. That, however, is just for starters. My Eye on Youth, Lucy Oppé, adds the necessary regalia: on the bib, a scattering of enamel badges—Superman, Rupert Bear, an aeroplane (all from Mr Freedom), a train (from Boston-151), and an applique fabric medallion illustrating "The Folk that Live on the Hill"; on one back pocket, another applique of a hamburger from Mr Freedom. And she wears hers with a deeply scoop-necked pink tank shirt by Sonia Rykiel.



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